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Chapter 2

The Setting

131 ALOR is a small and obscure island in the Netherlands East Indies. It lies directly north of central Timor at the end of that long string of land fragments called the Lesser Sundas. More specifically, it is 8 degrees south of the equator and between 124 degrees and 125 degrees longitude east of Greenwich. This places it about halfway between Java and New Guinea in an east-west line and about halfway between Australia and Celebes in a north-south line.

132 Alor's climate and vegetation reflect its proximity to the Australian land mass. There are prevailing southeast and northwest winds, with severe monsoon storms as the winds change. The wet season begins with a few thunder showers at the end of October, then works up to a crescendo in January, February, and March, when rains fall in a steady downpour each afternoon, sending spates rushing down the deeply 221 gouged river canyons. This is the period of planting and intensive weeding.

[32] With the gradual cessation of the rains the temperature falls slightly, and as the rainy season ends, first corn, then rice and beans are harvested. Later still comes the sweet potato season. By the end of the dry season the whole countryside is brown and parched, and finally many of the springs and small rivers dry up. The only important crop of this period is cassava. At this time natives burn over the land to destroy the weeds they have been cutting in their fields and to drive wild pig for communal hunts. Little survives the annual burning-over except eucs- 137 lyptus trees and a kind of blady grass known throughout the Indies as alang alang.

Alor is therefore not lush jungle country. Rich tropical growth is found only in the ravines where there is moisture the year round and where the land is too steep for cultivation—and to natives, land too steep for cultivation means nothing short of the perpendicular.

133 The terrain is so precipitous that one drops easily into accepting it 184 as an explanation for the remarkable diversity of language and culture on this small island. Alor is only about fifty miles long and thirty wide, but it supports a native population of approximately seventy thousand, [97] who speak innumerable dialects of at least eight different languages. 101 Abui is the name given the language of the area from which most of the subsequent descriptive data were drawn. It is fifty miles from the

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It is fifty miles from the
101 port of Kalabahi on the western bay to Kolana on the east coast, but by
[illegible] pushing himself a native can walk the distance in some four days. The
usual time allowed by officials on horseback is five. It does not seem
improbable, therefore, that linguistic variation has been fostered by the
difficulty of communication.

101 Culturally too, changes grade from one into the other as one passes
184 from village to village. The only sharp demarcations are between the
ten thousand coastal Mohammedans and the pagan mountain peoples of
the interior. These two groups hold each other in mutual distrust and
648 fear. At the end of the nineteenth century Chinese merchants began
175 trading on the coast. After the arrival of the first Dutch official in about
1908 coastal men have been designated as radjahs by the Dutch and
have been given control over the interior. This control was only gradu-
ally extended and was considered by the Hollanders still to be in proc-
ess, since Malay is not yet widely known in the interior and taxes are
still reluctantly paid. Prior to the Hollanders' arrival no such areas of
political organization existed; social control centered about kin and
village groups. Certainly the coastal people exercised no power over
the mountain population, despite brisk trade contacts at stipulated mar-
ket places.

648 At present the island is divided into four radjahships: Alor proper
631 (including the islands of Purs and Pantar), Kui, Batulolong, and Ko-
177 lana. These political divisions cut across both culture and language. Un-
der each radjah are kapitans who, with the assistance of a handful of
field police, administer smaller districts. The principal functions of the
radjahs and kapitans are collecting taxes and hearing litigations. A chief
called the kepala (Malay for head) has been appointed for these tasks
in each village, and groups of friendly villages have been unified under
a headman called a tumukun. This hierarchy is a Dutch innovation, but
it has been quite heartily accepted by the native population, with
whom it functions successfully. The system of litigation, however, has
been far more completely accepted than the system of taxation.

648 The government of the Netherlands East Indies is represented by a
civil administrator of controleur rank and by a military authority of
lieutenant's rank in charge of a garrison of some seventy Indonesian
troops. Two or three patrols of fifteen men are constantly on the move
through the island, often cutting across the most difficult terrain and
always without announcing their route of travel. In addition there is a
military doctor, who is responsible for the health of the entire popula-
tion. He has a hospital in Kalabahi and a small corps of Indonesian as-
sistants with limited training.